DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 817 RC 016 596

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TITLE Exploring Alternatives to Consolidation. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Las Cruces, N. Mex.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-RC-88-05
PUB DATE Jan 88
CONTRACT 400-86-0024
NOTE 14p.; Because this Digest was published in colored ink, on colored paper, and in reduced type size (for compression), a full-size typescript version has also been included here.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Centralization; Community Benefits; *Consolidated Schools; Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; High Schools; Interdistrict Policies; *Rural Schools; *School District Reorganization; School District Size; Shared Facilities; *Shared Resources and Services; *Small Schools; State Action; Student Exchange Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Alternatives to Consolidation; Cluster Districts; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

School reorganization has been used extensively as a strategy to deal with the problems of small and rural schools. However, there is no comprehensive evidence to prove that consolidation has met the problems of finance, staff, facilities, and curriculum for which it has been advocated, nor are consolidation's disadvantages and ill-effects of the community usually considered. Partial school reorganization allows a middle-of-the-road response to decreasing enrollments, tight budgets, and increased federal/state demands to provide students in isolated areas equal access to education. Three types of partial reorganization include: (1) Central High School Districts (when two or more school districts combine high school programs but retain separate elementary programs); (2) Cluster Districts (providing services shared by separate neighboring school districts, allowing access by students of different schools); and (3) Exchange of Students for Tuition (sending students to neighboring school districts for instruction). Personnel, programs, and equipment may also be shared--formally or informally--to provide services to students. Sharing may also be implemented through a state organizational structure. Other helpful approaches include state intervention and state financial aide, multiple teacher certification, application of computer modelling results, community designed reorganizations, and distance education. Thus, full-scale reorganization is not the only solution. (JMM)

State Intervention and State Financial Aid

State intervention in school districts can take several forms, as described by Monk and Haller (1986). They indicate that the state could intervene through a "counting votes system" that would reflect the feeling of each individual community involved in the process of reorganization.

Another intervention strategy is to design a system for informing the public prior to a reorganization effort, about how the new governing board will be integrated, and the new school structured. Monk and Haller also suggest creating, at the state level, special "necessity aid" to be included in the operating formula. This fund would be given to school districts operating under special economic circumstances, so consolidation would not have to occur.

Multiple Teacher Certification

Observers have suggested that certification standards for those teachers working in small and rural schools be changed to provide for a more general preparation, or certification in a number of areas (Gardener & Edington, 1982). Multiple certification would have the advantages of an increased retention of teachers and reduction of the teacher shortage by increasing the subjects that a single teacher could teach. The greater the versatility of teachers, the less likelihood there is that reorganization would be implemented for reasons of curriculum enhancement or concerns over quality. Efforts have already been made to implement programs of dual certification in elementary and special education (Steinmiller & Bell, 1986).

Application of Computer Modeling Results

This technique has been recently applied to simulate the effects of different population trends, financial factors, and other elements on the school district. The simulation allows the decisionmakers to make use of all the information available in the district and be able to plan ahead for needed changes. In particular, the Multiple Alternatives Model (MAM) was developed to evaluate schools for the potential benefits to the district of temporary versus permanent closure (Wholeben, 1984).

Community Designed Reorganizations

This design calls for a wide participation of the community in the process of deciding the governance and structure of a school district before any referendum for consolidation is passed. This approach may provide flexibility for local boards to design organizational structures which meet local needs.

One way to provide this kind of participation is forming "Planning and Transition Boards" (Monk & Haller, 1986). These are formed by a majority vote in the participating communities. If a board is then approved to be formed, the next step is to appoint members to it. This board is then responsible for formulating the plan for the new structure as well as for presenting it to the voters. Once the plan is approved, the board takes action to implement it. If the plan is disapproved, the board is dissolved and the districts involved remain separate.

How is educational technology an alternative?

Often called distance education, educational technology comprises an alternative strategy for offering instruction. The learning takes place when the student is physically remote from the instructor or learns primarily from materials developed elsewhere. Educational technology makes it possible for small schools to have access to a broader range of information and curricular offerings, so that learning opportunities can be expanded without a need for consolidation. The most common options combine audioteleconference with microcomputers, or interactive television which integrates satellite, fiberoptics, microwave, cable, slowscan TV, or instructional television fixed services (ITFS) technologies (Barker, 1987).

Summary

Different alternative strategies are available for the local school boards and school administrators to solve the problems of rural and small school districts without full scale reorganization. These approaches enable communities to retain the advantages of smallness while providing a quality education for their children.

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January 1988

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly or in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) U.S. Department of Education, under contract number 400-86-0024. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. government.

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ERIC DIGEST

SMALL SCHOOLS DIGEST

EDO-RC-88-05

Exploring Alternatives to Consolidation

By

Rodolfo Rincones

January 1988

ERIC® CLEARINGHOUSE ON RURAL EDUCATION and SMALL SCHOOLS

EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES TO CONSOLIDATION

School reorganization has been used extensively as a strategy to deal with the problems of small and rural schools. However, there is no comprehensive information to prove that consolidation has met the problems for which it has been advocated—those of finance, staff, facilities, and curriculum (Edington, 1976; Stephens, 1987). Reorganization has, in fact, not succeeded in several districts due to geographical limitations or the fact that in some communities the environment of the small school is preferred (Edington, 1976). Consequently, attention should be given to alternative strategies for school reorganization which could bring quality education to students living in sparsely populated areas.

Why are alternatives to school reorganization needed?

Schools are basic elements in rural and small communities. They are not only places where children receive education and interact with youngsters from different religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, but they also serve as community centers. In many cases, because of a large payroll, schools often provide an important economic base for the community. As a result, the school generates involvement and enjoys a great deal of support from members of the community (Jess, 1984).

Even though disagreement exists over the social and economic effects that a school closure may cause, it is commonly acknowledged that, after consolidation, regret and a feeling of frustration among members of the

community will persist. Some studies have asserted that, after a school closure, out-migration, population decline and neighborhood deterioration are set in motion, and support for public education diminishes (Andrews & Others, 1974).

Although school consolidation has often been seen as a cure for the problems faced by small schools, consolidation's disadvantages and ill-effects on the community have not usually been considered, and residents' objections have frequently been ignored (Monk & Haller, 1986). There are several alternatives to full consolidation which can help to ameliorate this situation.

What are some forms of partial school reorganization?

Partial school reorganization is one alternative to complete reorganization. It allows a middle-of-the-road response to problems originated by decreasing enrollments, tight budgets, and increased federal and state demands to provide students living in isolated areas equal access to education. It provides an organizational structure, and assumes several forms which--if the restructuring is found inappropriate--can readily be changed back to the preexisting situation. Three types of partial reorganization follow.

Central High School Districts

Central or regional high school districts arise when two or more school districts combine their high school programs and retain separate elementary programs.

Some of the advantages of this strategy are as follows (Monk and Haller, 1986):

-It facilitates reorganization where objections to consolidation are strong.

-It is directed toward the most problematic level of the school—the secondary level.

-Parents can continue to control elementary education, which is of most concern to them.

-Only older students are bused.

Cluster Districts

Cluster or union districts involve the sharing and provision of services by separate neighboring school districts, with certain academic programs thereby being made accessible to the students of different schools. Clustering can be implemented in a wide variety of settings and can address a range of needs. It usually involves more organization than is the case for other types of shared services and is initiated by local school boards. The local boards may, for example, select a superintendent who spends some time in one district and some time in another. Students from one district may be sent temporarily to another school for specific activities. Clusters have been formed around science programs and materials, microcomputers, staff development, and in-service for administrators.

Some of the steps for forming clusters are as follows (Nachtigal, 1985):

-Identify a school district of approximately the same size within

reasonable driving distance.

-Identify able people working with the other district.

-Identify key people at the state agency of education.

-Develop the agenda to be addressed by the participatory districts.

Exchange of Students for Tuition

This practice consists of sending high school students to neighboring school districts or even across state lines. Monk and Haller (1986) have concluded that this practice can be facilitated through state intervention by tying the tuition a receiving district charges to the difference between its costs and the increased level of state aid the higher enrollment generates. The advantage for small districts is that they avoid the cost of operating their own high school, and, depending on the wealth of their neighboring community, the tuition cost can be relatively modest.

What are other types of shared services and resources?

Neighboring school districts may, on a formal or informal basis, agree to share personnel, programs, and equipment to provide needed services to students. Some of the names given to shared services are cooperatives, leagues, consortia, collaboratives, pairings, or affiliations (Crohn and Nelson, 1986).

Sharing allows school districts to remain separate while gaining additional curricular programs of higher quality. It also lets the community keep its own high schools and consequently its own identity and

vitality. Through shared services, a comprehensive educational program can be made available even though the school is not very comprehensive in its offerings (Hanuske, 1983). Instructional materials, teachers, equipment, ancillary services, transportation, staff development, counseling services, special education, and vocational education can be shared.

Some of the advantages of sharing have been identified as follows (Hanuske, 1983):

-Program offerings can be secured and often expanded.

-A balanced faculty is maintained and the academic expertise increased.

-It enables schools to comply with federal mandates.

-Transportation facilities can be shared.

-Expenditures can be decreased through joint purchasing.

-It increases community cooperation and support, a sense of local autonomy, teacher retention, and school district stability.

Sharing takes several forms, two of which are sharing through a state organizational structure and voluntary inter-district sharing.

Sharing Through a State Organizational Structure

This type of sharing generally includes a special intermediary system mediated through what are often called educational service agencies, educational operatives, boards of cooperative educational services (BOCES), and regional consortia (Brodinsky, 1981). In most cases, these agencies are mandated, approved and directed by the state departments of education. The function of such intermediaries is to facilitate the

sharing of services and resources among school districts.

These agencies may have two functions. The educational function provides the mechanism whereby two or more school districts can share specialized courses, teachers, support staff, or instructional materials. The non-academic function facilitates the sharing of services such as purchasing, warehousing, or data processing.

Voluntary Inter-District Sharing

This is a voluntary arrangement made by two or more school districts to share services, programs, or resources. The less formalized structure of this arrangement enables the school to maintain its identity and autonomy (Cannon, 1983). An intermediary agency is not involved and this form of sharing differs from cluster districts in that resources and services are shifted from school to school, instead of bringing students to central learning places.

What are some other helpful approaches?

Some strategies can be implemented at the local level with state help to design reorganization alternatives suited to local conditions. These are appropriate when partial school reorganization cannot be implemented due to economic or geographic reasons.

State Intervention and State Financial Aid

State intervention in school districts can take several forms, as described by Monk and Haller (1986). They indicate that the state could intervene through a "counting votes system" that would reflect the feeling

of each individual community involved in the process of reorganization.

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January 1988

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